

Senators Abercrombie and Slossberg, Representative Cook and members of the Human Services Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am here regarding House Bill 5321, An Act Concerning Interpreter Qualifications. My name is MarySue Owens and I have been an educator and interpreter here in Connecticut for 28 years.

It was late October of 2012 - I'm sure many of you remember the winter storm that shocked the Northeast. Do you also remember the female interpreter who stood by Mayor Bloomberg of NYC during his emergency updates? She garnered quite a bit of attention for her "very animated interpreting," and became fodder for many comedians and late night talk show hosts, however the Deaf community defended and praised her for her excellent interpreting skills.

Let's fast forward to December, 2013 - the funeral of Nelson Mandela. A male interpreter stands somberly interpreting for various notable speakers. Very quickly social media was overwhelmed with comments from Deaf individuals and interpreters insisting he must be a fraud. It was obvious to them due to his lack of facial expressions.

I raise these two examples of interpreting because of the attention they each drew in the media and to illustrate that a qualified interpreter may look quite different depending on whether you are deaf or hearing. Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act before that, businesses, schools, hospitals, courts, and others are required to make their facilities and services available to their clients and consumers. While it is incumbent on them to hire interpreters most would agree they know very little, if anything, about the skill levels of those they hire. Often they will defer to an interpreting vendor and assume that their problem is solved. Or they may have been approached by an independent interpreter showing certifications and degrees and feel assured that the individual has the requisite skills.

This is the reason why the passage of HB 5321 is so important.

The task force that commenced more than two years ago was comprised of interpreters and leaders from the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. In response to complaints and concerns raised from consumers and professionals the task force chose to look at the current statute, CT General Statute Chapter 814, Sec. 46a-33a, and determine what was working and where changes should be made. Since its initial passage, the structures for deaf advocacy and support changed here in CT. Originally there was effectively only one game in town, the Commission on the Deaf and Hearing Impaired. Years later, Family Services Woodfield in Bridgeport also began providing interpreting services throughout the state, primarily in medical settings. Both agencies had the ability to evaluate their staff in house and determine the assignments for which each interpreter was qualified.

In the mid to late 90s we began to see more agencies and vendors from outside the state and independent interpreters entering the CT market. While some of the interpreters did have the appropriate skills, Deaf and Hard of Hearing consumers were encountering less than qualified interpreters and felt there was nothing they could do. This prompted the passage of the current statute, with the responsibility of overseeing that interpreters and those hiring interpreters were complying falling to the Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, CDHI. However the structure of what used to be CDHI has changed. When Commissioner Porter inherited the

agency a few years ago it consisted of a bare bones staff – two counselors to address the needs of Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals statewide, and an interpreting unit of four office staff to handle scheduling, questions, billing and management for the staff of twenty eight interpreters. These interpreters covered over 13,000 assignments from January 1 to December 31, 2013.

An area of primary concern, then and now, was the “interpreters” who were working in the school systems. I use quotation marks here because it was not uncommon for towns and schools to use different labels so as to not have to comply with the statute. These individuals were called communication facilitators, signing aides, or language assistants. While there are many talented and qualified Educational Interpreters there are those who have very rudimentary skills, sometimes just one or two semesters of sign language. In that most deaf children are born to hearing parents it does happen with some that their interpreter also becomes their sign language teacher and model. Whether these children later transfer to the American School for the Deaf or they meet professional interpreters in medical or legal settings it is then they realize that others may not fully understand them and vice versa.

In drafting HB 5321 the task force had several goals:

First, the need to update the statute’s language to reflect the certifications that are currently offered by the National Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, our professional organization and certifying body.

Second, to open up opportunities for more interpreters to become eligible to work in legal settings where we currently have a shortage.

Third, to support and reinforce the quality and professional development of our interpreters working in legal and medical settings, where there is an initial training of 30 hours mandated for each. Afterwards interpreters are required to work in that venue for a minimum number of hours annually to maintain and improve their skills.

Fourth, focusing on the area of Educational interpreting, where many feel we should have our most skilled interpreters, we wanted to ensure that Deaf and Hard of Hearing students have access to a minimum level of competence. While this area remains the only venue where an uncertified interpreter may work, there is a maximum time frame by which the interpreter must acquire certification by RID or score above a certain score on the Educational Interpreter’s Performance Assessment.

Lastly, in creating a monitoring board we wanted to provide consumers with concerns about an interpreter or an interpreting vendor an avenue to have those concerns heard and investigated.

Senators Abercrombie and Slossberg, Rep. Cook and members of this committee, I urge you to pass this bill to assure all consumers of interpreting services in CT that we are committed to providing access through the use of qualified interpreters for all of our citizens.

Thank you.

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